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ALLEGRA LEVY

Memorable Melodies

Jazz singer Allegra Levy is based in New York.

It's not that Allegra Levy is necessarily an intrepid traveler or impulsive risk-taker. The opening track on the 27-year-old New York jazz vocalist's first album, after all, was an ode to worry and indecision entitled "Anxiety." But when an email from a stranger appeared in her inbox one morning asking if she might be interested in taking a singing gig at a five-star hotel "somewhere in Asia," Levy, who had always stayed close to home and family, responded in the affirmative. Shortly thereafter she was on a plane to Hong Kong.

As it turned out, the stranger was a bass player who was putting together a group to play at Hong Kong's elegant Four Seasons Hotel. Levy turned out to be such a hit there, singing a jazzy mix of standards and original material with a piano trio, that she became the hotel's artist-in-residence for seven months. It was a life-changing experience, she said recently by Skype from London, where she was vacationing.

Levy emerged from her Far East sojourn a more seasoned, confident vocalist. The evidence is on display in her sophomore album, *Cities Between Us* (SteepleChase Records), which largely fulfills the promise of her 2014 debut, *Lonely City*. "I definitely feel more confident now," she said. "I lived in Hong Kong for nearly a year, playing at least two nights a week, five sets a night. I came back a stronger singer, for sure. Not only was I a bit older and wiser, but I also was feeling more comfortable with my authority as a bandleader, and with having my own voice."

The new album consists of seven originals for which she wrote words and music, three jazz covers (by Duke Jordan, Dexter Gordon and John McNeil) to which she has written new lyrics, and one well-chosen standard, Jerome Kern's "Yesterdays." On the session, recorded live in the studio in a single day, she is accompanied by an A-list band: Kirk Knuffke on cornet,

Stephen Riley on tenor saxophone, her frequent collaborator Carmen Staaf on piano and the veteran rhythm section of bassist Jay Anderson and drummer Billy Drummond. Levy wrote most of the arrangements herself, with assistance from Staaf and McNeil, a mentor from her days at New England Conservatory.

"There aren't that many singers who are doing what she's doing, coming out of the American Songbook tradition, but very personal," said Staaf, who worked with Levy on both of her albums. "She swings, which is not common for someone of her generation. She shows that the possibilities for jazz songwriting are not played out—there's still more to say and do in straightahead jazz and swing."

The lyrics on the new album reflect her recent experiences, including establishing herself as an independent bandleader in Hong Kong and falling in love. In her lyrics she tries to strike a balance between the romantic, rueful and humorous. "I think jazz sometimes takes itself too seriously," she said. "My lyrics are an attempt to add a splash of comedy even if it's dark. I grew up on Woody Allen—that's my sense of humor."

She says she is "very much attached to the American Songbook," but aims to modernize the lyrics and melodies, while still making them memorable. "I like it when people come up to me and say they have one of my songs, like "Cherry Blossom Song" or "Lonely City," in their head. Some people on the jazz scene think that's a bad thing, because their goal is to be cutting-edge and avant-garde. Things have gone in a more rock direction, if anything, where [a lot of new jazz] is really hardcore and complex. Not all jazz has to be pretentious or unrelatable. The avant garde is important and definitely has its place, but I don't want to do that. Jazz used to be an art form of the people, and I think it still should be. It can be a storytelling form, the way it always was."

—Allen Morrison

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